DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 475 371 RC 023 289

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TITLE	Indigenous Australian Education: A New Millennium, a More Focused Approach.
PUB DATE	2001-00-00
NOTE	9p.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.acea.edu.au/elo/newsletters/mel_conference/22.html.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Aboriginal Australians; *Cultural Awareness; *Educational Needs; Educational Policy; Elementary Secondary Education; *Equal Education; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Indigenous Personnel; Power Structure; Preschool Education; Racial Bias; Self Concept; Stereotypes; *Teacher Education; Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS	*Australia; Institutional Discrimination

ABSTRACT

Considerable progress has been made in Australia toward the attainment of equitable educational outcomes by Aboriginal people during the past 30 years, and by people of the Torres Strait Islands during the past 15 years. Although parity of outcomes has not yet been achieved, Indigenous education is now positioned within the core business of both government and non-government education systems, and a range of initiatives are taking place both at the policy and the school levels. It essential, however, that teachers are aware of the issues that impact on Indigenous students' learning. The issue of culture is problematic, because educators often assume there is a single Aboriginal or Torres Strait culture, which leads to stereotyping. All students need to be accepted as individuals, and provided with educational opportunities accordingly. The critical period for identity formation is childhood and adolescence, which means that in both primary and secondary schools, teacher interactions with students can influence how students construct their identities. Low expectations of children can result in low self-esteem. Aboriginal children need positive support to overcome negative self-concept and low self-esteem. Educational inequality is related to unequal power relationships. Schools can develop in students the knowledge and skills to contribute to social change and justice. Teacher educators must incorporate these issues into pre-service, in-service, and professional development programs for all teachers. (TD)

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ED 475 371

INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION: A NEW MILLENIUM, A MORE FOCUSSED APPROACH

1. Introduction

Last year - the centenary of Federation – Australian schools began to focus on the history of the nation with particular reference to the democratic processes used in establishing our systems of government and the concomitant laws which determine how we live, and work. It is relevant, therefore, to refer to the concept of citizenship; and within the context of this presentation, how constitutional changes of 1967 have led to Indigenous Australian students' access to and participation in education; as well as to the involvement of Indigenous Australians in educational decision-making, program design and delivery.

It was not until 1948 - the same year as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* - that the concept of Australian citizenship was formally defined and came into existence with the passage of the *Nationality and Citizenship Act* (later the *Australian Citizenship Act*). Drafted specifically in relation to immigrants, the Act states that:

> *Australian citizenship represents formal membership of the community of the Commonwealth of Australia; and*
> *Australian citizenship is a common bond, involving reciprocal rights and obligations, uniting all Australians while respecting their diversity...*

The meaning of citizenship thus encompasses rights, freedoms, duties and responsibilities. Many of the rights and freedoms available to non-Indigenous Australians (such as those of freedom of expression, movement, spiritual belief; rights concerning education, health and living standards, remuneration for work or service, social security) had in some instances been legislatively denied Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people. Alternatively, many Indigenous Australians had fulfilled citizens' duties and responsibilities, such as allegiance (membership of defence forces), as well as observance of laws, and support for their enforcement ('trackers', 'native police', etc).

It was not until 1967, however, that changes to the Commonwealth Constitution (overwhelmingly supported by Australian voters) permitted the Australian Government to include Indigenous Australians "in reckoning the numbers of the people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth..."; and "...to make laws for the peace, order and good Government of the Commonwealth..." with respect to Indigenous Australians "...for whom it is deemed necessary to make special laws..."

For education, the latter constitutional amendment, enacted in the early 1970s, led to changes from earlier often ad hoc programs for Aboriginal people. These programs had been largely compensatory, based on models of cultural deficit, and for the most part delivered by unskilled teachers employed through state departments responsible for native affairs. Thus, the education of Aboriginal people was secured within the responsibilities of state education departments. (Because of government discussions concerning annexure of the Torres Strait islands, these schools remained under the auspice of the Queensland department responsible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs until 1985.)

The *Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act, 1900* had determined that individual states assume responsibility for education. The 1967 federal referendum, however, by vesting responsibility for Aboriginal affairs in the Commonwealth, permitted the allocation of specific funds to the states (and territories) for Aboriginal programs, including education.

It has been a mere thirty-five years that planning and delivery of education programs for Aboriginal people (and seventeen years for Torres Strait Islanders) - clearly defined in accordance within both national and overall state education directions - has occurred.

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2. The *National Aboriginal Education Policy* (1989)

Towards the end of the 1980s, it was evident that long-term generic policies and practices - of which education was merely one component - had led to a situation where:

> *...Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people remain the most educationally disadvantaged group in Australia.... The* (Aboriginal Education Policy) *Task Force reported....Australians take it for granted, as an inalienable right of citizens of this country, that their children will receive at least 10 years of education, as well as the benefits of early childhood education. However, these fundamental rights have not been extended to all Aboriginal families. This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that in the compulsory school years, 1 in 8 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 5 to 9 years do not go to school or preschool, and for those aged 10 to 15 years an appalling 1 in 6 do not have access to appropriate schooling....* (DEET,1993:3)

Without specific policies and directions, those involved in Indigenous education within the states had been required to 'walk a fine line' between the policies and directions of the two levels of government (and to some extent, continue to do so today). A distinct national education policy did not emerge until the *National Aboriginal Education Policy* in 1989 (renamed *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy [NATSIEP]* in 1993).

The *NATSIEP* has a total of twenty-one goals for preschool, school, vocational education and higher education sectors grouped as follows:

Goals 1 to 6:	Involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in educational decision-making.
Goals 7 to 9:	Equality of access to educational services.
Goals 10 to 12:	Equity of educational participation.
Goals 13 to 21:	Equitable and appropriate educational outcomes.

The Commonwealth government legislated for funding to assist states and territories with implementation of the *NATSIEP*. Accordingly, budget allocations were made through the Aboriginal Education Strategic Initiatives Program (later the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program [IESIP]) on a triennial basis to supplement states'/territories' education budgets. The IESIP also provides direct assistance for Indigenous students (and their parents) at schools and post-school institutions, for example:

- *Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness Program (ASSPA)*: Available to school-based parent committees, on a per capita student basis, to help improve educational opportunities for Indigenous preschool and school students and to increase the participation of parents in their children's education.

- *Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Program (ATAS)*: Supplementary tuition to either individual or groups of Indigenous students at all levels of education, from primary school to TAFE and university.

- *Vocational Educational Guidance for Aboriginals Scheme (VEGAS)*: To assist Indigenous school students and their parents when they need information on education and career options.

- *Aboriginal Study Assistance Scheme (ABSTUDY)*: Contributes to students' education expenses, living expenses, and accommodation and fares where appropriate.

3. *A National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, 1996-2002.*

In 1995, a review of *NATSIEP* implementation found that while there had been improvements in educational outcomes by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, the achievement of goals nationally required a coordinated strategic approach by states' and territories' systems. Subsequently, *A National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, 1996-2002* was

developed by a Taskforce appointed by the Ministerial Council for Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA). The *Strategy* guides implementation of the *NATSIEP* across preschooling, schooling, vocational education and higher education sectors, through the organisation of the *NATSIEP*'s twenty-one goals into the following eight priority areas:

1: To establish effective arrangements for the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in educational decision-making;
2: To increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples employed in education and training;
3: To ensure equitable access of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to education and training services;
4: To ensure participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in education and training;
5: To ensure equitable and appropriate achievement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students;
6: To promote, maintain and support the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies, cultures and languages to all Indigenous and non-Indigenous students;
7: To provide community development training services including proficiency in English literacy and numeracy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults; and
8: To improve *NATSIEP* implementation, evaluation and resourcing arrangements.

It should be noted, however, that in the ten years since implementation began, the *NATSIEP* (with its supplementary funding) has provided a national framework with specific goals for the coordination of pre-existing states' and territories' programs; and accomplished improved educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across all sectors of education.

4. The *Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century* – a national document of inclusion.

Implementation of the *NATSIEP* by states and territories, has contributed to the recent formulation, by MCEETYA, of goals of inclusion.

On 22-23 April 1999, the Ministerial Council on Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) announced The *Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century*. To those involved in Indigenous education, this announcement is particularly significant. It is the first occasion on which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are specifically mentioned in a highest-level national schooling document.

An earlier statement - The *Hobart Declaration* (Common and Agreed National Goals for Schooling, 1990) - referred to students of all cultures, rather than specifying goals for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

It has been the experience of those of us with some years' involvement in Indigenous education that when programs are planned by our respective systems, the translation of "students of all cultures" has not necessarily included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Thus, we welcome the 1999 MCEETYA Declaration as a firm foundation upon which programs may be tailored to meet the educational needs and improve the educational outcomes of the range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The *Adelaide Declaration* clearly signifies the links between education and employment by its goals for varying education pathways, vocational education, links with business and industry, literacy and numeracy competence, skilling teachers, involving parents and communities, etc. In terms of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, the document presents a unified direction that might be interpreted as preparing states (and territories) to assume full responsibility for schooling of their Indigenous constituents at some time in the not too distant future. The social justice goals of *The Adelaide Declaration*...(below) encompass the two aspects of Indigenous education, ie. education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and education for all students about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, societies and contemporary issues.

3.3 *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have equitable access to, and opportunities in, schooling so that their learning outcomes improve and, over time, match those of other students;*

3.4 *All students understand and acknowledge the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures to Australian society and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to and benefit from, reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians;*

3.5 *All students understand and acknowledge the value of cultural and linguistic diversity, and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, such diversity in the Australian community and internationally;*

3.6 *All students have access to the high quality education necessary to enable the completion of school education to Year 12 or its vocational equivalent and that provides clear and recognised pathways to employment and further education and training.*

5. The *National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, 2000-2004.*

In order to accelerate progress towards the attainment of both the *NATSIEP* and *Adelaide Declaration* goals, in March this year, the *National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* was launched by the Prime Minister and the Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs. To align with the *Strategy's* proposed period of implementation, the Commonwealth funding period has been extended from prior triennial funding to a quadriennial budget allocation.

It is not common for a Prime Minister to launch an education document. This action, together with the extension of the funding period, and the planned evaluation of the *Strategy* throughout the four years of its implementation - with the requirement that reports are presented to Parliament by the Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs from 2002 - signifies the importance placed on the success of the *Strategy* by the Commonwealth government.

The six key elements of the *Strategy* address those factors that are seen to inhibit the attainment of equitable outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The elements are:

1. Achieving Attendance: increasing school attendance rates of Aboriginal students and Torres Strait Islander students to those of other Australian students;
2. Overcoming Hearing, Health and Nutrition Problems: addressing the major health problems that undermine learning for Aboriginal students and Torres Strait Islander students;
3. Preschooling Experiences: improving access to pre-schooling for Aboriginal children and Torres Strait Islander children;
4. Getting Good Teachers: training teachers in cultural awareness and encouraging them to remain for reasonable periods of time;
5. Using the Best Teaching Methods: employing teaching methods known to be most effective; and
6. Measuring Success, Achieving Accountability: Instituting transparent measures of success as a basis for accountability for schools and teachers.

Accompanying the *Strategy* is a statement by Indigenous Australians:

> *Our people have the right to a good education. Our children need the skills, experience and qualifications to be able to choose their future. Our communities need young people coming through with the education and confidence to be effective leaders. We need young people who can be advocates for our people, able to take their place in Australian society and business and still keep their culture strong.*
>
> *Over the past 30 years, despite some public perceptions to the contrary, a great deal of progress has been made in increasing the education levels of Indigenous Australians:*
> - *Participation in early childhood and primary schooling has improved dramatically;*
> - *Year 12 retention rates have shifted from single digits to above 32% in 1998;*

- *The involvement of Indigenous parents and communities in education has increased with over 3,800 parent committees in 1998 (run through the Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness programme), covering about 105,000 Indigenous school and preschool students;*
- *Indigenous participation in university courses has increased from under 100 people 30 years ago to some 7,800 in 1998;*
- *The participation rates of Indigenous 15 to 24-year-olds in vocational education and training have actually reached levels about the same as for other Australians.*

However, we still have a long way to go....

6. Issues impacting on schooling for Indigenous students

There are matters extrinsic to schooling that impact on Indigenous students' educational outcomes. It is neither expected of schools, nor within their functions or capacities to address these. Within schools, and indeed education systems generally, there are three broad issues – the concepts of culture, identity and power as these relate to Indigenous people - that need to be understood and incorporated into administrative and classroom practice accordingly.

a) The issue of culture

The term "culture" is one of the most complicated words in the English language. It can mean many things. In an education context, issues in relation to Indigenous Australians often arise, and just as often are referred to as issues of "cultural difference", "cultural inappropriateness", "cultural relevance", "a clash of cultures", and the like. It is rarely explained what is meant by these terms. Is it any wonder that many teachers experience difficulty when attempting to address such issues?

There are numerous academic discussions on the concept of culture. In an unpublished paper titled *"What is this thing called 'Culture'"*, Groome (1996:4), refers to many of these discussions and how they might relate to Aboriginal education. He writes,

> *Faced with the evidence of the destructive effects of traditional understandings of the word culture many theorists over the last decade have advocated new interpretations of the term. There is now a range of concepts being discussed. All of these share one aspect in common. They have sought to move away from the concept of culture as a fixed entity, a complex of 'concrete behaviour patterns, customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters'. (Geertz 1973:87) Instead they have sought to stress the role of individuals over and above that of groups in forming patterns of personal cultures.*

Thus, culture is seen as a construct, which is neither fixed nor measurable, but dynamic: *"...a living organism that is continually being constructed by individuals in the course of their day to day living."* (Groome, 1996:5)

There is not now, nor has there ever been, such things as the Aboriginal culture, or the Torres Strait culture. Yet lists of Aboriginal learning styles or Aboriginal behaviours continue to be made available to teachers. Such lists are problematic, in that they reinforce what is termed "essentialism", a notion that seeks to reduce Aboriginality to a few "essentials" or basic descriptors, usually based on traditional values. The lists are often then interpreted into practice as one of two approaches to teaching Indigenous students. Both approaches are dangerous. One approach denies urban Indigenous students any claims to having a characteristic identity; and the other approach proposes a generic Aboriginal culture or Torres Strait culture that anticipates certain behaviours of students. Both approaches result in Indigenous students being stereotyped and lumped together. Thus schooling becomes a disempowering process that hampers students' potential to learn and progress through their years of formal education. All students need to be accepted as individuals, and provided with educational opportunities accordingly.

With the notion of a range of cultures, comes values, lifestyles and language use, with implications for current practices of English literacy testing. Some questions we need to ask ourselves are: Who determines appropriate standards for English literacy? Which version of English is being tested? (Each of us uses a number of versions of English language on a regular basis.)

If culture is an individual construct, then it is linked with the issue of identity.

b) The issue of identity

As educators, we know that the critical period for the formation of identity is childhood and adolescence, which means that in both primary and secondary schools our interactions with students can influence the ways in which those students individually construct their identities. We can "make or break" them as students and, in the longer term, may influence their potential to become contributing members of society. We have either witnessed, or learnt by "trial and error" in our early years of teaching, the "self-fulfilling prophecy" of students assuming behaviours that reflect our words and actions. If we continually tell students they are slow learners or "stupid" or "dumb"; or that they are disinterested or "don't care"; or that they are disruptive or "no good"; then they will often react by behaving in accordance with our attitudes towards them. Alternatively, students who are encouraged, and their efforts praised and rewarded, will usually develop and grow as learners and as people.

> *Aboriginal children need to develop pride in themselves. They need positive support to overcome negative self-concept and self-esteem.*
>
> (Groome, 1995:14)

The starting point is, of course, to recognise the identities and backgrounds of all students, and demonstrate that we value the life experiences they bring to the learning situation. For Aboriginal students and Torres Strait Islander students, this means accepting them for who they are. But how do we do this? Who is an Aboriginal student or a Torres Strait Island student?

> *Being Aboriginal is not he colour of your skin, or how broad your nose is. It is a spiritual feeling, an identity you know in your heart. It is a unique feeling that is difficult for a non-Aboriginal to fully understand.*
>
> (Burney, 1983)

The Commonwealth government definition has three criteria relating to Indigenous identity, all of which must be met. An individual must -

- be an Aboriginal person or a Torres Strait Island person, or a descendent of Aboriginal people or Torres Strait Islands' people; and
- identify as an Aboriginal person or a Torres Strait Island person; and
- be recognised as such by their respective Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island community.

The definition contains no reference to physical appearance or to geographic location or lifestyle. Yet, in educational settings we continue to hear statements such as, "They say they're Aboriginal, but they don't look it."; and "They're not really Aboriginal - they live in a nice house; the parents have good jobs and drive cars; they're just the same as any suburban family." ; and " It's only the ones in the desert and the north who are the true Aborigines (or Torres Strait Islanders).". These examples are verbal expressions of attitudes and actions that not only deny students' identities, but also tell us more about the speaker than the subject. Unless we, as educators, attempt to examine our own prejudices and correct such statements, our inaction serves to confirm that *"...the major social scientific paradigms that have shaped education for non-white children and adults have, in part, been influenced by the racial identity development of educators themselves."* (Carter and Goodwin, 1994:307). We are thus guilty of contributing to the further disempowerment of Indigenous students in a system that has relentlessly perpetuated the myths and stereotypes that have abounded in this country since British occupation.

c) The issue of power

Education inequality is related to unequal power relationships. Within the structure of Australian society, Indigenous people are often referred as "the lowest rung on the ladder", which demonstrates the relationship between power and race. Our children become aware of this at a very early age.

> *As they travel, shop and watch TV, Aboriginal children begin to meet a world in which they rarely see Aboriginal faces. Most become aware of hostility towards them and their family in many*

settings. This awareness of a different world is dramatically confirmed when they first attend school. Suddenly they are in a new, overwhelming, environment in which they are very clearly a minority, and sometimes a despised one. Racism has many faces and it is rare to find a school in which several are not displayed.

(Groome, 1995:20)

There are many levels of power. At the macro level, Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people know that in a world where power is linked to financial wealth, they possess little of perceived value; consequently, as groups within the current social strata, they have no bargaining power and no say in directions for the future of this country.

Schools, however, are in an unusual position in this regard. On one hand, schools (education generally) reflect and reproduce social values, lifestyles, etc: yet schools can also develop in students the knowledge and skills to contribute to social change and justice, hence the power of pedagogy and of curriculum. Keeffe (1992:8) writes of the *...negative and positive force...* of curriculum as *...something which both works on and through people....its mode of operation* (viewed) *as both enabling and constraining.* He adds that:

> *Only such a sense of power is capable of viewing cultural change from two perspectives, those of the relatively powerful and the relatively powerless.*

Fullan (1993) considers that educational reform can do much to influence the dynamic of social change, and as educators, we can each play a part as agents of that process.

7. Teacher education

In order to travel the 'long way' towards equitable educational outcomes for Indigenous students, education systems and schools need to deliver relevant curriculum through inclusive practices. These require teachers, curriculum developers and administrators to interact with Indigenous parents, community members and students, which means having some knowledge and understanding of Indigenous cultures, societies, history, languages and contemporary issues.

Yet, few tertiary programs include either the background information or the tools for teachers, curriculum developers and education administrators to gain the requisite knowledge and skills to communicate effectively with Indigenous people or to understand Indigenous students and guide them towards achievement in the years of schooling. Since the 1980s, several policies and reports (for example, the National Aboriginal Education Committee's statement on teacher education, 1985; recommendations from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody, 1991; Reconciliation documents, 1992-2000) have recommended that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies are a compulsory component of teacher education, but relatively few tertiary institutions have acted on these.

8. Indigenous teachers

In the late 1970s, the National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC) - an advisory committee to the Commonwealth Minister responsible for Education - set a target of 1,000 Aboriginal classroom teachers by 1990. This aim was supported by schooling systems and by teacher education institutions where Indigenous student places were offered with the support of Commonwealth funds. Despite a range of strategies - such as special enclaves, remote area teacher education programs, courses for Indigenous education workers (IEWs), and places set aside in mainstream teacher education courses - by the end of 1990 this target was not achieved. Although over 1,000 Indigenous people had graduated as teachers nationally, not all were working in classrooms; and of the latter, many have since moved to other employment.

If it is accepted that the employment of Indigenous classroom teachers is related to the achievement of equitable outcomes for and by Indigenous students, then obviously issues of recruitment and retention of Indigenous teachers must be explored and firm strategies implemented.

9. Conclusion

Considerable progress has been made towards the attainment of equitable educational outcomes by Aboriginal people during the past thirty years – and by people of the Torres Strait Islands during the past fifteen years. Although parity of outcomes has not yet been achieved, Indigenous education is now positioned within the core business of both government and non-government education systems, and a range of initiatives are taking place both at policy and schools' levels. The current national goals for schooling, the *NATSIEP* and MCEETYA *Strategy*, and the *National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy*, if well implemented, can accelerate that progress. It is essential, however, that teachers are aware of those issues that impact on Indigenous students' learning, and are appropriately equipped with Indigenous parents and community members. Teacher educators must, therefore, incorporate these issues into pre-service, in-service and professional development programs for all teachers.

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Corporate Source: **Australian College of Educators, April 2001**

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